Review: SimFarm

by Kevin M. Savetz

IMG Rating: 1.1.1.1

Type	Farming Simulation
Publisher	Maxis (800/336-2947)
Retail Price	$59.95
Street Price	$35.00
Requires	Any color Mac, System 7.0 or higher, 4 MB RAM (2.5 MB free)
Protection	None

Archival reconstruction from the original Inside Mac Games electronic magazine. Text, styling cues, and artwork were extracted from the original Macintosh resources; the flowing PDF layout is new. Source: Inside Mac Games, March 1995.

Grab yourself a Garden Weasel, fire up the old cotton gin and sing a few bars of “Old MacDonald’s Farm” — welcome to SimFarm, Maxis’ latest foray into simulated worlds.

Executive summary: If you’ve read any of IMG’s reviews of Maxis’ other simulations, you’ve pretty much read this one. SimFarm, like the other “software toys” in the Sim-line, is a pseudo farm that you can manage as you wish. There is no ultimate goal, no predetermined way to win or lose. You can manage dozens of aspects of your farm, in any way you please. If you do well, fortune will befall you. If not, you may be infected, frostbitten or (most likely) bankrupt.

A Cluck-Cluck Here. . . There is so much to do in SimFarm — and so many choices to make — that the game can be overwhelming to the newcomer. Besides choosing and planting crops, you need to buy or lease equipment, build roads, fertilize land, feed livestock, sell crops, control pests and weeds, and rotate crops. If you’ve got the time and patience, you can head to the general store and buy your seeds and machinery yourself. If you’re overwhelmed, you can set the game to “auto-buy”, in which the game buys goods for you, but not necessarily at the best price. If, after all that, you have time to dabble in the futures market, you can do that, too.

Original artwork embedded with this review.

SimFarm is almost too accurate of a simulation — there's a lot — sometimes too much — to do. Although it's a wonderful game, the learning curve is much steeper than Maxis' other simulations.

Choices, Choices. Once you learn the ways of life of the farm, you still won't want to leave the manual far behind. SimFarm offers 24 crops to choose from, and each one has unique properties. If your tobacco is too dry, or if you fertilize your sugar beets, or if you don't flood your rice fields often enough, or if you place your orange orchards too close to a fence, your crops won't fare well. Until you learn the laws of the land, keep things simple and keep the manual on hand.

You'll also have to invest in a variety of farm equipment — silos, trucks, tractors, plows, harvesters, wind mills and water towers will dot the countryside.

I'd happily trade a few of the crop choices for a wider variety of farm animals. There is a plethora of crops to plant, but only four choices for animals (none of which seem to survive the wily weather of my Washington farm.) Horses, cows, pigs, and sheep are available. Raise your hand if you've ever been to a farm without chickens. There's my point.

Like in SimCity, nature can land a cruel blow with a variety of disasters — tornadoes, locusts, drought, flood, frost or windstorms. Things on a fledgling farm are tough enough, so you can disable the disasters.

One of the best features of this game that will make your life easier is "field scheduling", which lets you plan ahead for your crop and soil care. The computer then takes care of the details for the next few seasons, keeping ongoing maintenance to a minimum.

As you might expect, you can borrow money when finances are tight. Maxis has improved the loan process from other Sim Games — getting extra cash is much like using an automatic teller machine: press a few buttons to get a loan, press a few more to repay it. Elegant.

Original artwork embedded with this review.

The graphics are reminiscent of the original SimCity game, rather than akin to SimCity 2000. I found it difficult to identify some of the equipment on the map, and some of the crops are also tricky to identify, since they're not labeled. Can you draw a picture of sorghum, or visualize the difference between barley and wheat?

You can start your farm from scratch in any region of the U.S., or you can work on improving a starter scenario. Creativity comes in choosing appropriate crops for your geographic region and keeping them up. (My apple farm in Washington state would probably be a poor location for cotton, for instance. And Mississippi is no place to grow apples.)

Maxis is up to its usual witty standards in the manual and in the game itself. (For instance the dancing, fruit-wearing Carmen Mooranda who greets you when you've done well.) The manual is well-written (and absolutely essential for success.) And as always, Maxis games teach you something. The latter part of the user's manual is a history of farming and the theories behind it. (Four years of college didn't teach me what "degree days" are, but Maxis did.)

All in all, SimFarm is a winner. If you find the other Sim-games too easy, rest assured you'll find SimFarm to be a challenge.

Pros

- Steep learning curve
- Lots of options
- Very detailed game

Cons

- Steep learning curve
- No chickens, goats or lammas